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[Article]

## Modeling EFL Classes After Parent-Child Reading Interactions: A Theoretical Approach

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### Abstract

A commonly used technique in the transmission of native languages from indoctrinated speakers to their own offspring and other children within a common culture is to read aloud, with the learner reading along while the expert speaker both encourages them to read sections aloud and confirms understanding by eliciting answers to comprehension questions. This method of language acquisition has shown itself to be highly effective. Studies have repeatedly reported that in most cases children whose parents read to them have a higher level of fluency in their own mother tongue than children whose parents do not (Bus et al, 1995; Chow et al, 2003). If this is the case when transferring a language within a culture, it would seem logical that this method of teaching could also produce positive results in the EFL classroom. This paper will explore the possible benefits and drawbacks of styling an EFL curriculum around the practice of reading literature and folk stories with students, in a manner modeled after such parent-child interactions.

**Keywords:** Scaffolding, Reading Comprehension, Internalization, Reading Strategies, L+1, Zone of Proximal Development

## 親子読書の相互作用EFLクラスのモデリング：理論的な方法

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## Design Rationale

Parent-child reading interactions are an example of scaffolding. Scaffolding is linked to the comprehensible input theory posited by Krashen (1981, 2003 cited in Brown & Broemmel, 2011) and Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' (1934, 1987 cited in Feez, 1998). Krashen's theory states that learners can comprehend input given to them which is just slightly above their current level of English competence. He posits that it is at this level of activation that the greatest amount of desired learning takes place. Krashen (1981) symbolizes this theory as  $i+1$  ( $i$  being the current learners' English competence and  $+1$  signifying input which is just slightly above the learners' English competence). Vygotsky's concept stems from the 'gap' between two different levels of development possessed by a learner. These levels are:

- the level of independent performance and
- the level of potential performance.

This is where scaffolding plays an integral function in language learning. According to Hammond (2001) scaffolding is the 'support' received from people of higher ability that enables learners of lower ability to accomplish tasks and develop understandings that they would not acquire on their own. In the parent-child reading interaction, the parent provides the scaffolding for their child. This also approximates to the  $+1$  from Krashen's comprehensible input theory and the 'gap' that needs to be filled between the two levels of the learner's development.

The efficacy of scaffolding has been explored in the past. Feez (1998) designed and implemented a 'Text-Based' syllabus in Australia. The syllabus identified scaffolding provided by the teacher as an essential element in the process of language learning. The teacher provided assistance through explicit knowledge and guidance. This was accomplished by deconstructing a model text to enable the learner to understand what was being presented to them. Also, included in the syllabus was a series of stages in which each progressive stage was designed to require a decreasing amount of teacher contribution. While operating at a more rudimentary pedagogical level, parent-child reading interactions often follow a similar process of scaffolding.

The aforementioned syllabus was designed for students who had migrated to Australia and were learning English in an ESL setting. However, this approach can be mirrored to be made applicable in an EFL setting.

Other proven methods of improving comprehension and learning outcomes include instructing the learner in, and modeling the use of, reading strategies. Duke and Pearson (2008) discuss the importance of effective reading comprehension to the development of good readers. They provide and discuss a range of reading strategies that could be used to develop the learners' comprehension ability. These include:

1. Predicting: The students make predictions about the content of a text before it is read.

They then compare what actually happened with the prediction. This is done to activate the students' schemata with regard to the particular text.

2. Thinking-aloud: The students verbalize thoughts and feelings out loud as they read a passage. This aids to improve comprehension and engage students with the text.
3. Summarizing: The students identify the key elements of a certain passage, either orally or in writing. This helps students focus on the main ideas and disregard the less relevant content.
4. Visualizing: The students use sematic maps, diagrams, flowcharts etc. to develop their understanding of certain elements contained in a passage. This is done to help students recall ideas and information at a later time.
5. Questioning: The students use questions before, during, and after reading a text to gain an understanding of the text. The questions generated can originate from both the teacher and students. This helps students engage with a text, check their comprehension, and construct memory representations.

Further, the National Reading Panel (2003, cited in Carlisle & Rice 2002) found in their research that by teaching and using the strategies outlined above it is highly possible to improve a student's comprehension.

Duke and Pearson (2008) also provide steps on how to apply each strategy. The steps are:

1. Explicit description of the strategy and when and how to use it
2. Student models the strategy after the teacher
3. Collaborative use of the strategy
4. Guided practice of the strategy and gradual release of responsibility
5. Independent use of the strategy

The steps above share the same rationale as that underlying scaffolding. However, just offering good reading strategies is not enough. The teacher should use a combination of these strategies to aid the student in better understanding the text and developing schemata of how to tackle future texts he or she may encounter. These combined comprehension strategies have been implemented in the past by government departments. For example, the Students Achieving Independent Learning (SAIL) is used in Montgomery County, Maryland, USA (Pressley et al., 1994 cited in Duke & Pearson, 2008). As discussed in Duke and Pearson (2008), SAIL uses a number of strategies mentioned above. To examine the efficacy and effectiveness of SAIL, a quasi-experimental study was conducted (Brown et al., 1996 cited in Duke and Pearson, 2008). The study found that second grade students in SAIL classrooms outperformed students from a classroom with no SAIL instruction on standardized evaluations of reading comprehension and vocabulary. The practices defined in these findings used in conjunction with the parent-child interaction model will inform the approach to be detailed.

## **Design**

### **Materials.**

One of the first concerns is the identification of appropriate reading material. For reading strategy intensive classes, the native speaking teacher (hereafter referred to as the NT) should make this choice. The reason for this is that, in most cases, the NT will have the most developed knowledge concerning what is available. He or she should be the most capable at identifying written works that complement the strategies being taught, an approach recommended by Duke and Pearson (2008). This responsibility will also ensure that the NT is familiar with the material to be taught and that they will have a greater insight into how it is to be presented.

For classes that are less focused on teaching specific reading strategies, allowing the students to choose what texts they will read may also prove a useful strategy. The act of making a choice will result in their being more invested in the results of that choice (Cialdini, 2006). Thus, this may be an effective strategy for increasing motivation and enthusiasm, qualities which, in themselves, have been linked to higher levels of reading comprehension (Duke, 2008).

Having decided the reading materials with a mind to the learners' ability levels and the desired outcomes, the next thing to consider is the basic structure or flow of the class. Depending on the English levels of the students and the literature being studied, periodic stops to review what has been read and to check students' comprehension are crucial to the proposed method. But, before getting too deep into the mechanics of comprehension and review, the importance of reading aloud in turns as a group will briefly be discussed.

### **Group work.**

When considering how to implement group work, the role of the educator must first be clarified. With regard to the proposed methodology, the presence of an NT should be considered absolutely essential. As previously mentioned, this proposed classroom method is styled after both the interactions between parent and child while reading together and the dynamic flow of a native English Jr/Sr high school classroom. The NT will generally be more capable with regard to the proper pronunciation of the vocabulary to be encountered, and the natural flow and tone (narrative, expository, etc.) of the work being read. In addition, due to the NT's familiarity with the language they will be able to elaborate on certain phrasing and allusions the author might use that could otherwise be too subtle for a non-native speaker to understand.

In a typical EFL class, one way to begin would be for the NT to commence reading aloud with instructions for the students to silently read along while using a colored pen or highlighter to mark areas of difficulty or interest. This initial reading, taken at a moderate speed, should set the tone in two ways for the reading to follow. The first of these is that it would demonstrate how the material

should be read. Different kinds of written work and different motivations for reading them will lend themselves to different reading outcomes. A written work of narration may be read with an eye for tone; a newspaper article for the main point and its supporting facts. Poetry would be read differently than either of these.

This initial reading will also help students to understand the desired learning outcomes. Since it is possible to read for the purpose of improving, among other things, speed, pronunciation, and/or comprehension, this initial reading should model the approach to be taken.

While reading along, as a child would with a parent, the learners will begin to internalize the language; the proper pronunciation of difficult vocabulary, use of intonation, and flow of the language will start to become intuitive. This is natural method of language acquisition is allows the NT and the literature to provide the necessary scaffolding. The experience of reading with the NT will provide the learner with the necessary cognitive tools to bridge challenging linguistic gaps once the scaffolding is withdrawn (Applebee et al., 1983).

After a paragraph or two, allowing for an appropriate point to switch readers, the teacher could choose a student to continue where they had left off. In the choosing of the reader, the ability levels of the students should be taken into account. The NT may choose to have a student they know to be capable take over. The NT may instead decide to choose a student for whom the task will be challenging. In this case, it is advisable to do more preparatory work such as having the students shadow read the passage with the teacher before being expected to re-read it aloud on their own. For the motivation levels of the students to remain high and for them to cultivate the self-esteem necessary to be capable participants in the lesson, none of them should be made to feel inadequate in front of their peers. Shaming a learner when in the midst of learning could have negative results, causing them to further shy away from future challenges. It may also be of benefit to the classroom dynamic to choose readers in a non-sequential order. Students with low motivation may see this class reading time as an opportunity to sleep or do unrelated work. By choosing readers non-sequentially, this can be avoided.

While students are reading aloud, it is the teacher's responsibility to take note of areas of difficulty. Depending on the situation, a teacher may find it appropriate to assist students with difficult vocabulary pronunciations while reading, or to go back to the point of difficulty after the student has reached the end of their reading. It should also be the teacher's intention to point out the areas that were read well, the examples of how the students succeeded, in order to keep them feeling capable and efficacious.

Upon reaching an appropriate stopping point, a few paragraphs or a couple pages depending on the level of the class and the material being read, the teacher would then instruct the students to quickly review what has been read. They should be encouraged to ask both the students in their immediate vicinity as well as their teacher for clarification regarding vocabulary and grammar points they found difficult. It is of great importance that this clarification and review be conducted, to whatever extent

the students' abilities allow, in English. Otherwise, it runs the risk of becoming a translation exercise and of eclipsing the goal of English interaction.

Once the section has been adequately clarified with regards to grammar and vocabulary, it is time to address story comprehension. Depending on the size of the class and the English ability of the students there are a couple different ways in which an ESL teacher could test story comprehension. A key element in this proposed classroom method is to promote comprehensive discussion of the literature amongst students. The native speaking teacher acts merely as a guide, encouraging natural English conversation, correcting pronunciation and grammar when necessary, and also participating in the students' group discussion(s) when appropriate.

For this approach to work, it requires that the learners be capable of engaging in spontaneous conversations with one another about the literature being studied. It may not be possible to accomplish this with some ESL students unless they are given a basic arsenal of generic literature questions that they can build upon to get themselves started. On the first day of class, an ESL teacher may choose to present students with a page containing such basic questions as "Who are the characters in this story?", "Where does this story take place?", "When does this story take place?", and so on. Through regular repeated classroom use, students will become accustomed to these questions fairly quickly. After a few classes spent practically applying these questions to various stories, students will have naturally committed these basic questions to memory, and they will be better prepared to answer according to the conditions of any given story.

Basic conversations about story related content can naturally continue from here with further guidance from the ESL teacher. Adding higher level vocabulary and questions which investigate deeper levels of plot and meaning can further enrich the ESL students' educational experience with authentic socio-cultural elements often missing in textbook-based approaches to language study. Asking ESL students to discuss such considerations as "What did the author want you to feel about the protagonist and/or antagonist?", "Can you relate these characters to people in your life?", "What was the cause of the main character's misfortune or triumph?", "What would you have done differently than the main character?", etc., will bring the English language alive for them and increase their fluency while simultaneously opening a vista of dynamic thought that highly unlikely to be attained by memorizing different ways to say "Hello, I'm Kenta. Where's the bathroom."

## Conclusion

This paper has presented a methodological approach to English instruction that employs the use of extended reading and discussion based upon the kinds of shared reading interactions common among parents and children in many cultures. It has been the contention of this paper that such an approach, properly applied, would produce a number of positive outcomes, not all of which would be limited to a

learner's success with regard to the acquisition of English. Critical reading skills and the multicultural understanding in which this methodology might result could prove useful in any number of endeavors. It is with this in mind that the researchers support the further investigation, testing, and application of this model.

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